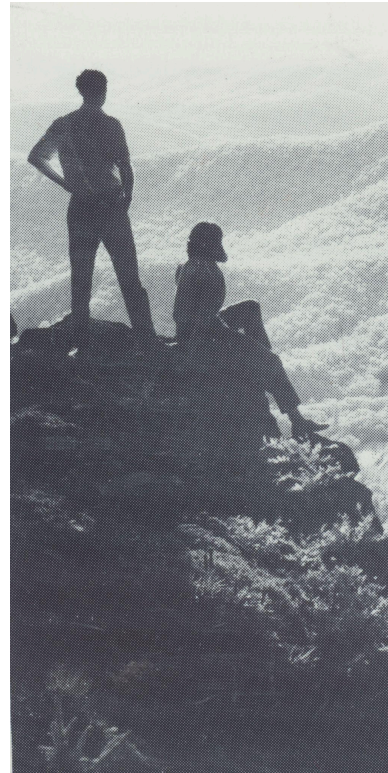
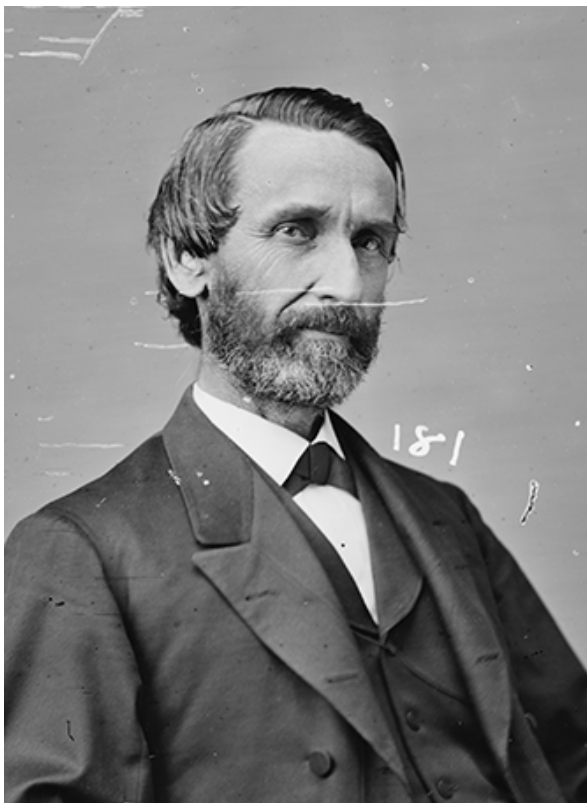


## **Backstory: Lenoir-Blowing Rock Turnpike**

The Blue Ridge are beautiful but have you ever thought of the difficulties in traveling around the High Country without modern roadways? Visitors to Blowing Rock faced this issue in the 19th century with the arduous journey keeping many from traversing the area's rugged terrain. James C. Harper, nephew of Lenoir merchant James Harper, founded the Lenoir-Blowing Rock Turnpike Company in 1845 after seeing the increased need for easier access to the village. Harper surveyed the route from Blowing Rock to Lenoir around 1846 to 1847 and was president of the Turnpike Company from 1856 until his death in 1890. He managed the turnpike's construction, which was built by hundreds of both free laborers and enslaved individuals. Mules and oxen were used to haul off debris with laborers using picks, shovels, and gunpowder to build the turnpike. Historian Barry M. Buxton notes, "The turnpike had a graded dirt surface, leveled by teams pulling drag pans behind them to scrape the roadbed smooth. Switchbacks were used to



keep the slope manageable for heavily-laden horse-drawn wagons." (Image above: A couple surveying the Blue Ridge. Left image: James Clarence Harper circa 1860 - 1875. Image via the Library of Congress).



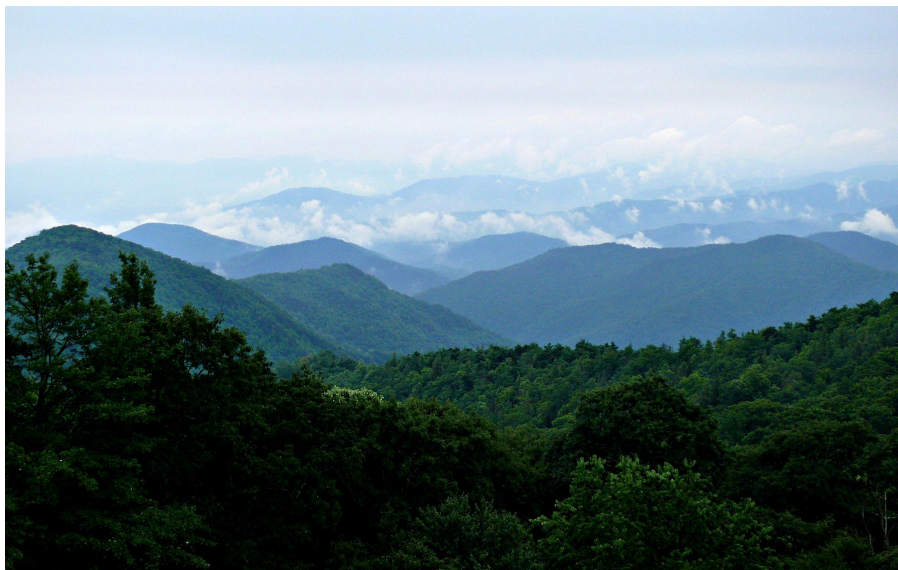
The Lenoir-Blowing Rock Turnpike generally followed the path of the current U.S. Highway 321 route from Lenoir to Blowing Rock. Both towns benefited from the construction of the turnpike with increased travel and trade evident in both locations. Travel from Lenoir to Blowing Rock and vice versa was now only a day's carriage ride away. Many Lenoir families began building summer homes in Blowing Rock with James Harper's "Summerville" home constructed in 1856, followed closely by homes built by the Millers and Isbells of Lenoir. Local travel and

increased business were huge benefits of the turnpike. The area would be further opened up with the coming of the railroad in the late 1800s with the stop in Lenoir being a favorite for those summering in Blowing Rock. However, decades before trains would come rolling through the High Country, the Lenoir-Blowing Rock Turnpike gave visitors and locals alike a much-needed maintained



roadway for transportation. (Above image: The first passenger train arriving at the Lenoir Depot circa June 5, 1884. Image via PWRR.org).

Many North Carolinians may be unaccustomed to toll roads but not those who traveled the turnpike in its early days. Two toll gates could be found on the turnpike around the early 1900s with a two-horse wagon costing 25 cents, a one-horse wagon would be 20 cents, horseback riders paid 10 cents, pedestrians paid no fee, and automobiles of the



day paid one dollar. It took the length of a day to travel the turnpike with many taking a break at the halfway point to stay the night at various boarding houses. Toll gate keeper Roby Gilbert worked the turnpike during the 1920s and recollected that individuals from Lenoir tended to call the turnpike the

“Lenoir-Blowing Rock Turnpike” while those from Blowing Rock referred to it strictly as



the “Blowing Rock-Lenoir Turnpike.” (Above image: A vista of the Blue Ridge Mountains).

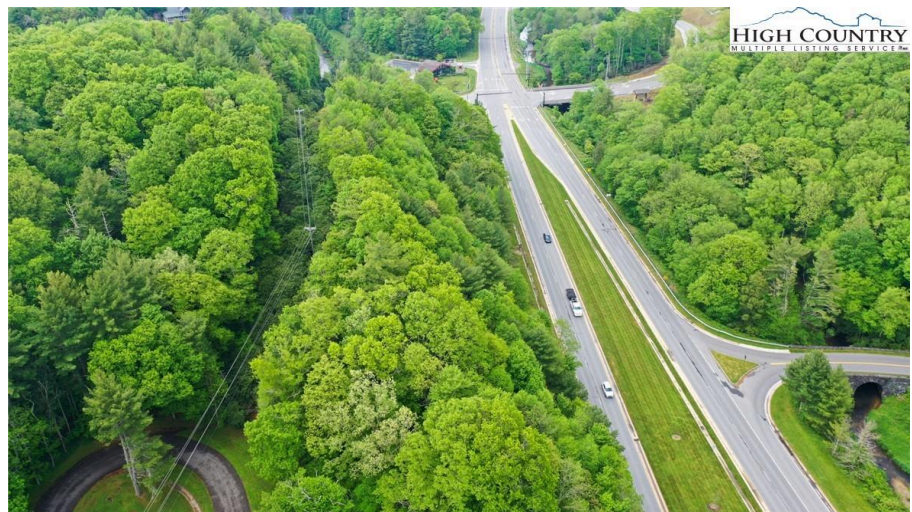
The State of North Carolina purchased the Lenoir-Blowing Rock Turnpike in 1921, just two years after having purchased the Boone-Blowing Rock Turnpike. The state



completed paving U.S. Highway 321's route from Boone to Hickory by 1926 making travel to the area even easier. The improvements made to the turnpike in the 1920s directly correlate with increased numbers of visitors and guests to a multitude of Blowing Rock area hotels. A 1920 editorial from the Charlotte Observer notes, “Thanks to the magnificent public highways, Blowing Rock has been brought within easy reach of Charlotte and each summer hundreds of Charlotte people run up to the Rock, to Linville and

other cooling spots in the mountain vicinity to whiff the mountain breezes, cool off and become invigorated with draughts of ozone. Without doubt one of the most picturesque beauty spots in the United States, Blowing Rock has for years attracted hundreds of visitors, despite its former inaccessibility. The building of the magnificent turnpike from Lenoir to the Rock has brought it within easier reach of the tourist and this season it is overrun with visitors...We are glad to note this announced improvement at Blowing Rock. Search as one may, no more beautiful mountain scenery can be found anywhere in the world than that of the Blowing Rock section.” (Above image: A sign for U.S. Highway 321).

While the Lenoir-Blowing Rock Turnpike may now be largely merged into U.S. Highway 321, its role in Blowing Rock's history is undeniable. Without this critical route, many would not have had the chance to visit Blowing Rock and its development into a premier resort town may



not have come to be. (Above image: A section of U.S. Highway 321 in Blowing Rock. Image via Compass Real Estate).